

RAPID AND PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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### RRA: Origins and Evolution

The philosophy, approaches and methods now known as rapid rural appraisal (RRA) began to coalesce in the late 1970s. There was growing awareness both of the biases of rural development tourism - the phenomenon of the brief rural visit by the urban-based professional, and of the costs, inaccuracies and delays of large-scale questionnaire surveys. More cost-effective methods were sought for outsiders to learn about rural people and conditions.

In those days most professionals were reluctant to write and publish about the "informal" methods they invented and used. They feared for their professional credibility. They felt compelled to conform to standard statistical norms, however costly and crude their application. In the 1980s, though, RRA's own principles and rigour became more evident. As the 1980s began, RRA was argued to be cost-effective, especially for gaining timely information, but still with some sense that it might be a secondbest. But by the end of the 1980s, the RRA approach and methods were more and more eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible with more traditional methods. To my surprise, wherever RRA was tested against more conventional methods, it came out better. In many contexts and for many purposes, RRA, when well done, has shown itself to be not a second best but a best.

In establishing the principles and methods of RRA many people and institutions have taken part. An incomplete listing of countries where they have been developed is Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Perhaps more than any other movement, agroecosystems analysis, pioneered in Southeast Asia by Gordon Conway and others at the University of Chiang Mai and elsewhere, established new methods and credibility. The University of Khon Kaen in Thailand has been a world leader in developing theory and methods, especially for multidisciplinary teams, and in institutionalising RRA as a part of professional training. Now, as we enter the 1990s, "hard" journals regularly publish articles on RRA. The problem is not just to gain wider acceptance for RRA, but also to ensure quality, so that when it is done it is done well.

### Principles of RRA

Different practitioners would list different principles, but most would agree to include the following:

- optimising trade-offs, relating the costs of learning to the useful truth of information, with trade-offs between quantity, relevance, accuracy and timeliness. This includes the principles of optimal ignorance - knowing what it is not worth knowing, and of appropriate imprecision - not measuring more precisely than needed.
- offsetting biases, especially those of rural development tourism, by being relaxed and not rushing, listening not lecturing, probing instead of passing on to the next topic, being unimposing instead of important, and seeking out the poorer people and what concerns them

- triangulating, meaning using more than one, and often three, methods or sources of information to crosscheck
- learning from and with rural people, directly, on the site, and face-to-face, gaining from indigenous physical, technical and social knowledge
- learning rapidly and progressively, with conscious exploration, flexible use of methods, opportunism, improvisation, iteration, and crosschecking, not following a blueprint programme but adapting in a learning process.

#### The Menu of RRA Methods

In its early days, RRA seemed little more than organised commonsense. During the 1980s, though, much creative ingenuity has been applied and more methods invented. A summary listing of headings can give some indication of the types of methods known, without being exhaustive:

- secondary data review
- direct observation, including wandering around
- DIY (doing-it-yourself, taking part in activities)
- key informants
- semi-structured interviews
- group interviews
- chains (sequences) of interviews
- key indicators
- workshops and brainstorming
- transects and group walks
- mapping and aerial photographs
- diagrams
- ranking and scoring
- quantification
- ethnohistories
- time lines (chronologies of events)
- stories, portraits and case studies
- team management and interactions
- key probes
- short, simple questionnaires, late in the RRA process
- rapid report writing in the field

Diagramming and ranking have provided some of the less obvious methods. Diagramming has come to include many topics, aspects and techniques, such as transects, seasonalities, spatial and social relations, institutions, trends, and ecological history. Ranking methods have been evolved to elicit people's own criteria and judgements. An ingenious and simple example is Barbara Grandin's wealth ranking, in which respondents are presented with slips of paper, one for each household in a community, and asked to place them in piles according to their wealth or poverty. These and other methods have been modified and developed, and more will be invented in coming years.

#### Participatory Rural Appraisal

RRA began as a better way for outsiders to learn. In answering the question - whose knowledge counts? - it sought to enable outsiders to learn from rural people, and to make use of indigenous technical knowledge to assist outsiders' analysis. Its mode was mainly extractive. But knowledge can also be articulated and generated in more participatory ways, in which interviewing, investigation, mapping, diagramming,

presentation and analysis are carried out more by rural people themselves, in which they "own" the information, and in which they identify the priorities.

On these lines, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is a new form of RRA which shifts the initiative from outsider to villager. It has several antecedents, and draws on several traditions, including the community development of the 1950s and 1960s, the dialogics and consciencisation of Paulo Freire, participatory action research, and the work of activist NGOs in many parts of the world which have encouraged poor people to undertake their own analysis and action. The term PRA was probably first used in Kenya to describe village-level investigations, analysis and planning undertaken by the National Environment Secretariat in conjunction with Clark University, USA. PRA was introduced into India in a joint exercise of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Institute for Environment and Development in 1988. Since then, it has evolved and spread rapidly in the NGO sector in India, with MYRADA, based in Bangalore, taking a leading role, together with AKRSP, Action Aid and others. The participatory orientation of PRA has given new impetus to the development of methods, contributing to an explosion of inventive activity in India and Nepal in the past year. One of the delights of PRA has been the lack of blueprint, and the encouragement to practitioners to improvise in a spirit of play.

Towards the end of 1990, reviewing an astonishing year of innovation by colleagues in India and Nepal, I see five points standing out as "discoveries", at least for me.

#### i. villagers' capabilities

Villagers have shown greater capacity to map, model, quantify and estimate, rank, score and diagram than I had supposed.

Participatory mapping and modelling have been the most striking finding. The literature on mental maps has been largely based on people in the North, often urban, whose mental maps are quite limited. It seems that villagers in the South have much more extensive and detailed mental maps, and given the right conditions, can express this visibly on the ground or on paper, either as maps or as three-dimensional models (for example of aatersheds). They have now created many (I would estimate hundreds in India) of such maps and models, usually showing the huts and houses in a village (a social map) and/or the surrounding village area (a resources map). Most recently they have been indicating household details, using seeds, colour codes, and markers such as bindis or kumkums (the small spots women place on their foreheads), to indicate for each household, the numbers of men, women, and children, wealth/poverty, the handicapped, immunisation status, education, and the like. With an informed group or person, a census of a small village can be conducted in less than an hour, and much other information added by "interviewing the map".

Similarly, with quantification, estimating, ranking, scoring and diagramming, when the methods and materials are right, villagers have shown themselves capable of generating and analysing information beyond normal professional expectations. The fixation of professionals that only "we" can count and measure has tended to obscure the capacities of rural people themselves. Normal professionalism also values absolute as against relative or comparative quantification, and identifies trends and changes by comparing measurements at different points of time. This is often unnecessary. For practical purposes directions of change, and rough proportions of change, are all that are needed; and using PRA methods,

these can be indicated by villagers without measuring absolute values. Various methods of ranking, and more recently of scoring, have also proved powerful sources of insight.

In all this, the methods and materials have been important in enabling villagers' capabilities to be expressed, but methods in themselves are not enough.

#### ii. the primacy of rapport

The key to facilitating such participation is rapport. At first sight, it is a mystery why it has taken until 1990 to "discover" the richness of the knowledge, creativity and analytical capacity in villagers. But when the widespread beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of outsiders are considered, there is little mystery. Outsiders have been conditioned to believe and assume that villagers are ignorant, and have either lectured them, holding their sticks and wagging their fingers, or have interviewed them, asking questions rapidly, interrupting, and not listening beyond immediate replies. Lecturing and interviewing are part of the problem. The ignorance of rural people is then an artifact of our ignorance of how to enable them to express, share and extend their knowledge. The attitudes and behaviour needed for rapport have been missing. These include:

- \* participation by the outsider
- \* respect for the villager
- \* interest in what villagers have to say and show
- \* patience, wandering around, not rushing, and not interrupting
- \* humility
- \* materials and methods which empower villagers to express and analyse their knowledge

#### iii. visual sharing

Visual sharing is a common element in much FRA. With a questionnaire survey, information is transferred from the words of the person interviewed to the paper of the questionnaire schedule where it becomes a possession of the interviewer. The learning is one-off. The information becomes personal and private, owned by the interviewer and unverified. In contrast, with visual sharing of a map, model, diagram, or units (stones, seeds, small fruits etc) used for quantification, all can see, point to, discuss, manipulate and alter physical objects or representations. Triangulation and crosschecking take place. The learning is progressive. The information is visible and public, added to, owned and verified by participants.

For example, in participatory mapping and modelling, villagers draw and model their villages and resources, deciding what to include, and debating, adding and modifying detail. Everyone can see what is being "said" because it is being "done". In shared diagramming, information is diagrammed to represent, for example, seasonal changes in dimensions such as rainfall, agricultural labour, income, indebtedness, food supply and migration. Paper can be used for diagrams, but the ground and other local materials have the advantage of being "theirs", media which villagers can command and alter with confidence.

#### iv. sequences

Some of the participatory methods have been known and used in the past (Rhoades 1990). There are now some new ones, but perhaps more striking is the power of combinations and sequences. To take some examples:

\* with participatory mapping, villagers draw not one, but several maps, with each becoming more detailed and useful.

\* social mapping provides a basis for household listings, and for indicating population and other household characteristics, and is a useful stage in most topic PRAs.

\* transects are planned using a participatory map, leading naturally into villagers acting as guides for outsiders.

\* wealth ranking follows easily and well from a village map, and is marked on it.

\* with matrix ranking, eliciting a villager's criteria of goodness and badness of a class of things (trees, vegetables, fodder grasses, varieties of a crop or animal, sources of credit, market outlets, fuel types...) leads into discussion of preferences and actions.

\* with a transect, observation and discussion lead into the identification of problems and opportunities, and what might be done about them.

\* in a group interview, key informants are identified for further discussions.

In such ways as these, participatory methods fit well with a flexible learning process approach, if anything somewhat more open-ended and adaptable than earlier RRA.

#### V. training and reorientation for outsiders

RRA training conducted in Thailand in 1970 took six weeks, which was considered inadequate. PRA training in India has been taking four or five days. It usually entails a team camping in a village, learning and using various methods, all as part of a participatory process which leads to identifying actions by and with villagers. Attention is paid to outsiders' attitudes and behaviour. Villagers are encouraged to map, diagram, participate in transects, and plan. The aim of the training for the outsiders is to facilitate changes in perception and action, listening not lecturing, learning progressively, embracing error, being critically self-aware, and themselves participating, for example reversing roles by being taught by villagers to perform village tasks. For some outsiders, no significant change takes place. For some, though, there opens up a new range of possibilities and a sense of freedom to experiment and innovate. It is then not necessary to be trained in all the methods. They can be tried, improvised and adapted subsequently, and new ones can be invented. The outsider's creativity is released, as well as that of the villager.

#### Dangers

RRA and PRA face dangers. Like farming systems research, they could easily be discredited by over-rapid adoption and misuse.

The warning signs are there: demand for training which exceeds by far the competent trainers available; requirements that consultants "use RRA", and perhaps soon to "use PRA" and then consultants who say they will do so, when they do not know what these entail; and the belief that good RRA or PRA are simple and easy, quick fixes, when in fact they can be quite difficult to do well. RRA and PRA are a culture and a set of attitudes:

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their methods require skill; without the right attitudes and behaviour they work badly or not at all; and some people are better at them than others. The word "rapid" can also be used to justify rushing and to legitimate biased rural development tourism, when really the R of RRA should stand for "relaxed", allowing plenty of time. And above all, there is the danger that hurry or lack of commitment will mean that the poorest are, once again, neither seen, listened to, nor learnt from, when much of the rationale for RRA/PRA is to make time to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them.

#### Potentials of RRA and PRA

Despite these dangers, the long-term potentials of both normal RRA and of its newer form in PRA, seem vast. Except perhaps for Thailand, RRA has been adopted only on a small, localised, scale. We are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. Already RRA has been used for appraisal and analysis in many subject areas. These include agroecosystems; natural resources, forestry and the environment; irrigation; technology and innovation; health and nutrition; farming systems research and extension; pastoralism; marketing; organisations; social, cultural and economic conditions; and many special topics. Many other applications can be expected, urban as well as rural, and in the North as well as the South.

For the future, PRA has several strong points. By transferring the initiative to rural people, it generates rapport, and forces outsiders to learn. It elicits, presents and crosschecks much information in little time. And like much RRA, it is more interesting and enjoyable for all concerned than conventional questionnaires. Moreover, through encouraging rural people to present and analyse what they know, it can generate commitment to sustainable action, as it has done in both Kenya and India. Increasingly in India, NGOs are adopting the PRA approach and methods as part of the process of identifying development actions by and with villagers, in domains which include watershed management, social forestry, credit, horticulture, and marketing cooperative development. The PRA approach and methods appear versatile and adaptable, and other applications can be expected. PRA also enhances capabilities. It can entail not just shared knowledge, but also shared analysis, creativity and commitment.

In addition, for the 1990s, three potentials stand out.

First, RRA/PRA has to date still made rather little impression in universities and training institutes. Universities in Thailand may be exceptions, in which case it is important for universities and training institutions in other countries to learn from their experience. In India, in late 1990, key training institutions are now proposing to introduce PRA. They include the National Academy of Administration at Mussoorie, the National Forest Academy at Dehra Dun, the Institute of Rural Management at Anand, and the Indian Institute of Forest Management. Only when many more universities and other tertiary institutions for education and training employ RRA/PRA and a new generation of professionals is well versed in its philosophy and methods, will it finally and securely take root. The potential for applications in training and education remains enormous and still largely unrecognised.

Second, all too often senior officials and academics who pronounce and prescribe on rural development lack recent direct knowledge, and base their analysis and action on ignorance or on personal experience which is decades out of date. RRA/PRA can bring them face-to-face with rural



people. Mini-sabbaticals in villages for senior officials are being discussed, and experience to date in India has been that they appreciate PRA and take readily to it, if suitably introduced. PRA experiences can help them to keep in contact and up to date and to correct error. It can provide learning which is intellectually exciting, practically relevant, and often fun.

Third, PRA supports decentralisation and diversity, allowing and enabling local people to take command of their resources and to determine what fits their needs. By involving them from the very beginning of a development action, it should enable them to own it more and should contribute to commitment and sustainability. It is part of the complementary paradigm for rural development which stresses process, participation, local knowledge, and reversals of learning. Nothing in rural development is ever a panacea, and PRA faces problems of spread, scale and quality control. But as we enter the 1990s, it does present promise. If the 1990s are to be a decade of local empowerment and diversity, then participatory rural appraisal will have a key part to play.

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#### Some Sources

\* = to the best of my knowledge available free on request from the Sustainable Agriculture Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1 0DD

Much of the now large literature on rapid and participatory rural appraisal is grey and ephemeral, but the sources recommended below include some of the more accessible.

Early publications on RRA available in some libraries include Agricultural Administration vol 8 no 6, 1981; and Richard Longhurst ed. Rapid Rural Appraisal: Social Structure and Rural Economy, IDS Bulletin vol 12 no 4, 1981.

The best wide-ranging introductions to RRA are:--

Khon Kaen University, 1987 Proceedings of the 1985 International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal, Rural Systems Research and Farming Systems Research Projects, Khon Kaen, Thailand, University of Khon Kaen, Thailand

\* Jennifer McCracken, Jules Pretty and Gordon Conway 1988 An Introduction to Rapid Rural Appraisal for Agricultural Development, IIED

Both these publications have bibliographies.

For PRA see:

\* Charity Kabutha and Richard Ford "Using RRA to Formulate a Village Resources Management Plan, Mbusanyi, Kenya", in RRA Notes 2, October 1988 pp.4-11

\* Jennifer McCracken, Participatory Rural Appraisal in Gujarat: a trial model for the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), IIED, London 1988

\* An Introduction to Participatory Rural Appraisal for Rural Resources Management, Programme for international Development, Clark University, Worcester, Mass, USA and National Environment Secretariat, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Nairobi, Kenya, November 1989

\* FRA Handbook, from the same programme in Kenya, a larger and longer version, available from IIED

As we enter the 1990s, developments in rapid and participatory rural appraisal have themselves become rapid. The best sources for keeping up with them are:

\* RRA Notes, IIED

The PALM/FRA Series free on request from MYRADA, 2 Service Road, Domlur Layout, Bangalore 560 071, India. PALM = participatory learning methods. The series already includes issues on participatory mapping, interviewing, enhancing participation in FRA, and other practical experience and advice. MYRADA will also soon be producing a South Asian FRA Notes (exact title not yet known) which will disseminate information and experience from others engaged in pioneering and using the FRA approach and methods. I recommend this series especially for those interested in recent practical aspects of FRA.

For a recent thoughtful and provocative paper, which indicates many of the origins of the FRA approach and methods, see:

Robert Rhoades 1990 "The Coming Revolution in Methods for Rural Development Research", User's Perspective Network (UPWARD), international Potato Center (CIP), P.O.Box 933, Manila, Philippines